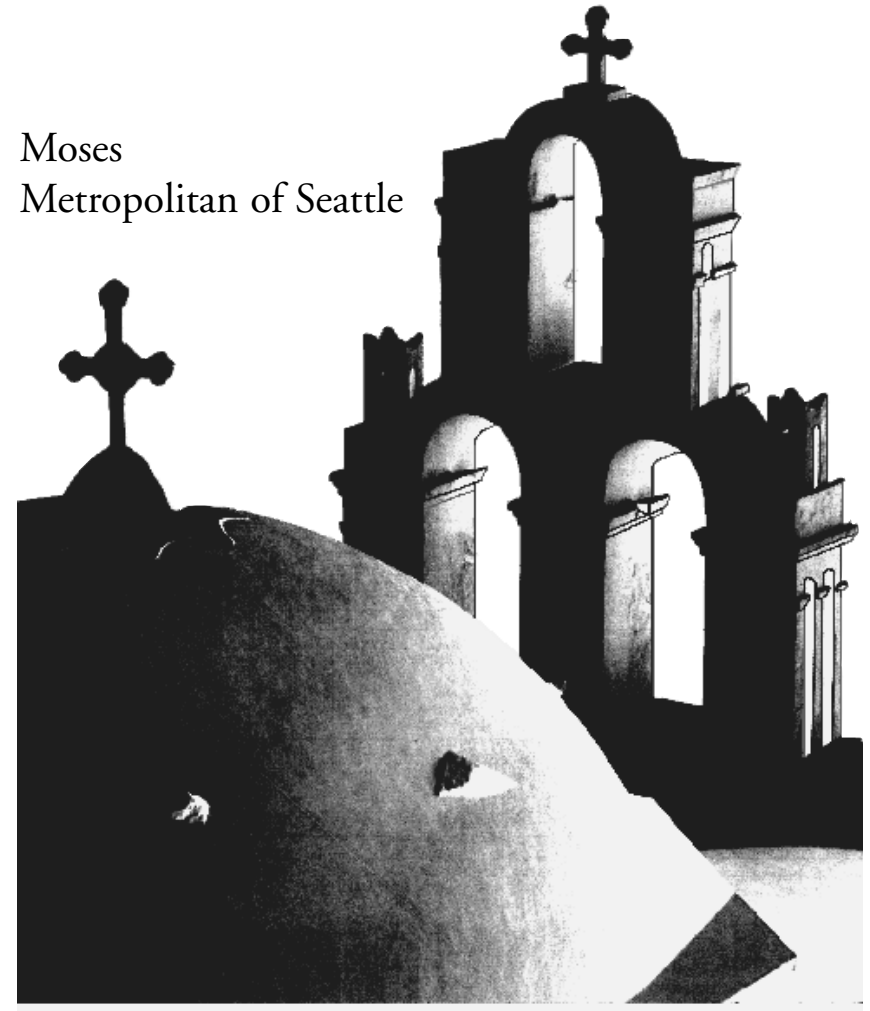


FOR WHAT PURPOSE AM I COMING TO CHURCH?

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For what purpose am I coming to Church?

*To whom will I have respect, but to the humble and meek,
and the man that trembles at my words. (Esaia 66:2)*

Awake, O sleeper, and Christ shall shine upon thee.

(Ephesians 5:14)

We know from the life of Saint Arsenius the Great that after entering upon a life of solitude and prayer he constantly asked himself, “Arsenius, to what purpose hast thou gone forth?”

We as Orthodox Christians, similarly must ask ourselves each and every time we approach our parish church, for what purpose am I coming to church?

Surely, we attend church for our own spiritual profit. One might say, yes. But what is our goal? We know from many sources—one of which is the *Conversation of Saint Seraphim of Sarov with Moltvilov*—that the reason that we labor at any of the virtues and the ultimate purpose of Christian life is for us to become partakers of the grace of the Holy Spirit. But as we know from this same discourse, one can labor at the virtues to no purpose as the foolish virgins did, receiving no oil for their lamps, that is, receiving no grace for their labors. It follows that, yes, we can labor to attend church and gain nothing.

As Saint Seraphim explains in the same *Conversation*, “And the Lord says: Not every one that saith unto Me: Lord, Lord shall be saved, but he that doeth the will of My Father (Matt. 7:21)—that is, he who does the work of God and, moreover, does it with reverence, ‘for cursed be he that doeth the work of God negligently’” (Jer. 31:10, Septuagint)

For this reason the saints sought to cultivate a reverent fear of God. Saint David of Thessalonica prayed and fasted for three years while enduring the ascetical feat of dwelling in an almond tree, in his wisdom he all the while entreated God for this gift of reverent fear. As it is recorded in the *Life of the Saint*, “When the three years had passed, a holy angel appeared unto him saying, ‘David, the Lord has heard your supplication and grants unto you this favor for which you have asked many times, that is, that you be humble-minded and modest, and that you fear Him and worship Him with proper reverence.’ We know from his life that this “mother virtue” (to borrow a term from Saint John Climacus) gave birth to many spiritual “daughter virtues” and Saint David was manifested to all as a clairvoyant wonder-worker. [p. 123 *Orthodox Word* 1970 May/June, vol. 6 No. 3]

If one reads the church service books, one can see that this reverence and fear of God is an intrinsic part of the Church's understanding. As it is proclaimed in the Great Ektenia: *"For this holy house, and for them that with faith, reverence, and fear of God enter herein, let us pray to the Lord."*

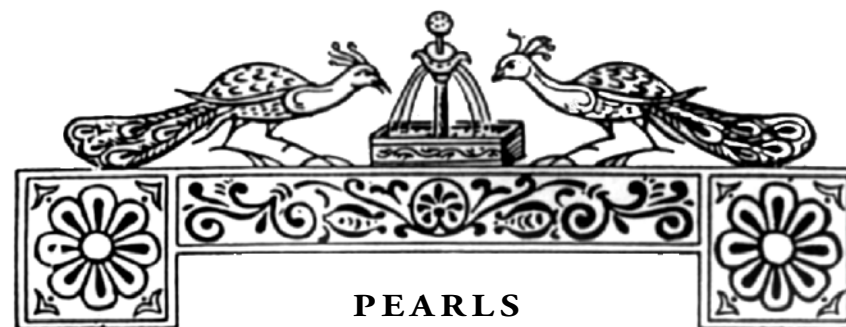
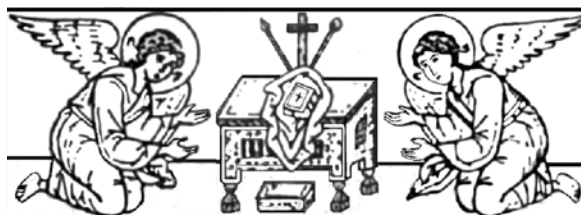
After the Our Father when the deacon commands, *"bow your heads unto the Lord,"* the priest's secret prayer reads as follows:

We give thanks unto Thee, O invisible King, Who by Thy measureless power hast created all things, and in the multitude of Thy mercy hast out of nothing brought all things into being. Do Thou Thyself, O Master, look from heaven upon them that have bowed down their heads to Thee: for they have bowed them not to flesh and blood, but to Thee, the dread God....

In the holy Liturgy we encounter our awesome and terrible God, Who created all things by His measureless power and Who came in meekness and humility in order to gather us as a hen does her chicks. A strange and unheard of paradox which is beyond the mind of man.

Saint Pachomius the Great explains the awesomeness of the New Covenant and the fearful world-transcending Divine Liturgy. As a monk describes the words of Saint Pachomius in his life, "...He explained the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, applying the explanation to the two peoples, 'For the first people,' he said is the outer Tabernacle, whose service consisted in animal sacrifices, visible loaves, the lamp stand and the lamps, and some other things. But the calling of the nations is the Holy of Holies, that is, the fulfillment of the Law. And everything in the Holy of Holies is more glorious than the outer Tabernacle. For instead of animal sacrifices it has a censer of incense; instead of a table, the Ark of the Covenant with the spiritual loaves, the book of the Law and all that is to be found there, and instead of the light of the lamp stand, the mercy seat where God appears as a consuming fire, that is, God the incarnate Word Who was made propitiation for us by appearing in the flesh."

In every Divine and Sacred Liturgy fearful and awesome things are accomplished, God appears as a consuming fire to sanctify the gifts and overshadows all of the faithful. Let us not draw nigh carelessly. It is our Father's house and He calls us all to the banquet, but let us with fear of God, faith, and love draw nigh.



PEARLS

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; and there is good understanding to all that practice it: and piety toward God is the beginning of discernment; but the ungodly will set at nought wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:7)

Fear is the paternal rod which guides our way until we reach the spiritual paradise of good things. When we have attained thereto, it leaves us and turns back. (*Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, Homily Forty-Six)

When asked what children should be given to read, Fr. Ambrose wrote:

"It is my opinion that a young mind should first of all be occupied with sacred history and readings of the Lives of Saints of your choice, which will unnoticeably sow the seeds of the fear of God and Christian life. You especially need to make them understand, with God's help, how important it is to keep God's commandments and what disastrous consequences follow breaking them. All of this will lead them away from the example set by our first parents, who ate the forbidden fruit and were therefore exiled from Paradise. You can put Krylov's fables away until later, for now teaching your child some prayers by heart, like the Symbol of Faith and certain Psalms, for example: *He that dwelleth in the help of the Most High* (Ps. 90), *The Lord is my Light* (Ps. 26), and the like. The main thing is that the child himself be occupied according to his strength, and directed toward fear of God. Everything good and kind comes from this, while, to the contrary, idleness and not being instilled with the fear of God are often the cause of all evil and misfortune.

When the fear of God is not instilled, children will not bring forth the desired fruits of good morals and a well-ordered life, no matter what you occupy them with. When the fear of God is instilled, all occupations are good and profitable." (*Elder Ambrose of Optina*, p. 163)